Lorimer T-3 (1920-4; 1934-5) 1939 AV7 Burusho AV7

Chapter 20

HUNZA BABIES

EARLY one October morning I saw Naját going off to the mill with a little sheepskin bag on her shoulder. She looked even more radiant than usual as she stopped to talk. After the usual interchanges: "Have you heard our news? Bibi Gímo's baby boy has been born!" This was splendid. No. 1 already possessed four girls, one married, Shukuru almost marriageable and already growing her hair as a preliminary, and our two special friends, Shamúli and Bano, and two boys, Derwish and Man Ali Shah; a third son was the wanted thing. Mother and baby were doing well, and the household was overjoyed.

I took pains to ascertain how soon I might call to offer my congratulations—the eighth day was best. So I set Zaidu to bake biscuits with butter and treacle, which he was sure would be acceptable, and I borrowed Qudrat Ullah for half an hour to coach me in the correct phraseology. When the great day came I threaded my rough way down the lane and turned in at the hospitable door in the wall, through which I had several times entered their garden but never yet their house. Here I was greeted by the four youngest, all looking as pleased as if they had by themselves conjured the baby into being. They led me through the byre, past the cow, who also had a festive air on her bed of nice clean straw, and into the living-room. It was beautifully bright with sunshine pouring through the smokehole, and as neat and clean as a new pin. The chief sleeping bench had a red felt carpet on it and had been left empty for me. On the other dais, also gaily carpeted, Bibi Gímo sat in state beside the cradle. She was looking so fresh and young and tidy that I hardly knew her. Hitherto I had seen

2: Lorimer T-3 (1925–8 1934–5) 1939 AV7 Burusho AV7

846 her a little dusty as she worked in the fields and somewhat tired perhaps as her time drew on. To-day she had on a gay, green cap, new cotton dress and trousers of bright chintz, and her hair was beautifully brushed and braided. I gave her hearty greetings before accepting the seat of honour left for me. On the cross-bench sat old grandfather, looking very handsome with his grey beard neatly trimmed, and by him stood the proud father and uncle (all ousted by my presence from their normal sitting bench), while an old woman—Bibi Gímo's mother—crouched with the proprietary air of the *accoucheuse* on the ground beside the mother's dais. Derwish and Man Ali Shah joined the menfolk, the two small girls sat round the fireplace with Naját and Shukuru, while the married sister and other women formed a group behind. Dádo came in with me as a matter of course and sat at my feet, though neither a neighbour nor a relative. (I had fully expected him to fade out at the threshold.)

846 576 I took a long breath, summoned all my wits and—a little self-consciously because of so large an audience—started carefully firing off one by one the fine phrases with which Qudrat Ullah had furnished me: "God grant your son long life and happiness! May he live to be a comfort to you! May he take your beasts in summer to the mountain pastures! May he bring you gifts when he comes home from his travels! May he give you a good daughter-in-law and children to brighten your age! May he prove a worthy son of worthy parents!" and so forth till I stopped from sheer exhaustion. These admirable sentiments, couched in the best traditional form, sounded so absurdly different from my usual, halting, extempore speech that they provoked giggles of delight from Naját and her companions. They fully realized that these pretty speeches must have been carefully prepared, and they told me afterwards that everyone had been much gratified at my having taken the trouble to learn the right things to say. But, after all, you may as well say the right things as the wrong, and even amid the simplicities of Hunza, ceremonial phrases are valued on ceremonial occasions.

846 Then, having recovered breath, I consulted Dádo in a whis-

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per as to whether it would be in order to ask to see the baby, who was entirely hidden by a doubled homespun blanket flung over the ridge-pole of his cradle. "Quite the right thing." I made my request and approached the cradle. They turned back the cloth for me, and there was a very handsome baby (for seven days old) in beautifully clean kit, very carefully bolstered in, his eyes painted black all round, which gave his face a comical look of maturest wisdom. This black stuff is supposed to be "cooling" to the eyes, and is quite probably a disinfectant of some kind. I said what a fine baby he was, and how big for his age, and so forth, then wished them all the best of luck, repeated my congratulations, and turned to come away. But they called me back to receive two heaped dishes of grapes and apples. I protested as well as I could against robbing their store-room, especially at such a moment when hordes of hungry guests would come well-wishing—it is for similar occasions that the "emergency reserve" is set apart—but I protested in vain. Derwish and Man Ali Shah followed us up the hill bearing the fruit, and I could only resort to the contemptible expedient of small silver.

Anyone who knows life in the East will realize how incredible it seems that a woman should sit in state to receive visitors of both sexes while her menfolk look proudly on. No wonder the Hunza women have this happy fearlessness, this dignified gait, these courtly manners.

I was typing text next morning when I heard piping voices in the verandah outside my window: "Mother, Mother, Mother, *dear*, do come at once; we are threshing buckwheat on our floor." I went out to find seven of my smallest friends, boys and girls from the Middle Channel above, led by Nímo, dancing with excitement and impatience: "Do come and take photographs! Father and mother say you are *please* to come." I wasn't very keen to go, for we were expecting some Swedish missionaries to lunch. They were passing through on their way to Kashgar—another month's march—and they might arrive at any moment. Still . . . I had asked all our neighbours to send for me when anything was going on, and if I showed reluctance such summonses might stop. I scrambled up to the

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846 A couple of months after Bibi Gímo's, Soni's baby son was born—the first grandson of No. 1A—and his arrival was the cause of great rejoicing. I had heard nothing of it till I commented one day to Aliko, whose handsome white beard had suddenly turned orange, on the fact that I had not lately seen Afrots. "She's been staying over with her mother's people in Haiderabad," he said, "but she's coming back to-day." When I next saw her she raced up to me breathless: "How do you do (in English), I've got a baby brother, I've got a baby brother, I've got a BABY BROTHER!" The opportunity of an eighth-day formal visit had passed, so I clambered over a boulder or two into their orchard-garden and called up the
[364] blank, unresponsive-looking wall of the house. Soni was busy in the store-room, and put her head out of the one tiny wooden window—the only "window" of a Hunza house is a square, shuttered, ventilation hole in the store-room—inviting me to join her on the roof. I climbed the primitive ladder with caution—a camera and other impedimenta always made me even less agile than need have been—and there she was spinning away and occasionally giving a rock to the cradle beside her. I utilized as many suitable phrases as I could remember without rehearsal, and was rewarded with a peep at a fine little fellow of a fortnight whom any mother might have been
846 proud to own. Soni was gaily dressed, and had dotted her face
302 all over with unsightly brown spots which I learned were
752 supposed to be "good for the complexion" after childbirth. The custom used, it seems, to be universal, but it must be dying out, for I saw only a few young mothers so decorated. Anywhere else one might suppose it a charm against the Evil Eye, but the Burusho of Hunza are so free from any taint of this baleful superstition—so hard-lived where it has once had root—that I think there must be some other explanation. We later found that among the Burushaski speakers of Yasin, all the younger women lived under a permanent coating of similar brown cosmetic, washed off only for feast days, in the belief that it protected their skin against the cold winds of their harsher climate.

000 Afrots, joining devoutly in the admiration of her baby

2: Lorimer T-3 (1920-4; 1934-5) 1939 AV7 Burusho AV7

opportunity of utilizing. I should not, of course, have dreamt of offering advice or help—the reckless courage with which some travellers ply their medical ignorance has always horrified me—but I thought that some knowledge of birth-rites at home might enable me to follow Hunza procedure with more intelligence. But if an Englishman's house is his castle, the fortress-like home of the Hunzukuts is no less inviolable, and in the event I could no more have proposed to a Hunza woman to let me attend her confinement for mere scientific curiosity than I could make the same proposal to an English friend.

Like women in many other parts of the East, the Hunza woman bears her child in a crouching posture, which gives full play to her muscles—admirably developed by varied exercise and unatrophied by chair-sitting—and speeds up the period of labour. An experienced woman, usually her own mother, acts as midwife, while her husband guards the threshold and her brother the smoke-hole to prevent the instrusion of evil man or evil spirit. Within a week, as has been related, she is ready to receive visitors, and within a fortnight she is out of doors again doing light work in the fields.

There are, of course, no vital statistics available for infant or maternal mortality, but as far as my enquiries and observations extended, casualties are rare. This is not to be wondered at, since for countless generations Nature has here been at her beneficent work of weeding out inferior stocks, uninterrupted by soppy sentiment or misguided philanthropy. No C_3 girl baby can be reared in an incubator to die in childbirth or burden the community with D_4 offspring.

Hunza are more or less used to it. However, it does cause trouble with the eyes of the natives. It also weakens the lungs of some of the older women, who probably spend most of their time indoors during the cold months of the year. 164

I questioned the doctor and the Mir concerning prenatal care, but from what they told me, I could find no provisions whatsoever made for prenatal care outside the individual home. 843

The death rate at childbirth, they told me, was next to zero, but the doctor also mentioned that a woman would not consider going to a doctor for gynecological reasons under any circumstances. She would rather die. 165 845 757

He also told me that before and after delivery of a child, Hunzan women do not know of any rest. The pregnant woman works harder and does more laborious jobs till the last day of the term, in the belief that hard and laborious work makes delivery easier and uneventful. 843 846

"But," he went on, "they are very careful in exerting themselves during the early days of conception. After delivery they are again up and doing again, only after a short rest."

It seems to be obvious that the method followed by the women of Hunza prior to childbirth "works" because both mother and child come out of it "uneventful." When events occur at such times, it usually means serious trouble. 843

He went on to tell me further that gallstones, renal calculus, coronary heart disease, hypertension, valvular lesions, myxoldeama thyrsotoxcasis, mental deficiencies, cancer, poliomyelitis, arthritis and diabetes are absolutely unknown in Hunza. 164

From what I have seen and gathered I am worried about the situation. They are now importing their sugar, 177 263 439

4: Biddulph G-3 (1873-1878) 1880 AV3 Dard AV3
Burusho AV7

In Gor, rings are exchanged at marriage. In the ruling families of Hunza and Nager, it is the custom, when a daughter is married, for the bridegroom to present her at betrothal with a gold and silver needle. In Yassin, when, as not unfrequently happens, the bridegroom is too poor to pay the required price, the young couple elope, with the consent of the bride's parents. At the end of ten days the bridegroom comes to them and asks forgiveness, promising to pay the required sum by degrees. A little scene is acted, forgiveness is granted, the neighbours are summoned to the feast which has been already prepared, and the wedding is celebrated. This is to save the credit of the bride's family in not having received a sufficient price for her.

The old marriage barriers between the castes are beginning to be broken down under the levelling influence of Mahommedanism, and in a few generations will probably disappear altogether. The birth of a son is always a matter of general rejoicing. The friends of the happy father at once make it an excuse to stop work for the day, and seizing their matchlocks keep up a general *feu-de-joie* till their powder flasks are empty. The village band is summoned, and dancing kept up round the door for the rest of the day. No notice is taken of the birth of daughters. In the Oxus Valley and in Sirikol, when a son is born, all the father's friends hang their weapons on the walls of his house, so as to accustom the infant to martial sights. After seven days the weapons are returned to the owners, except those belonging to near relations, who receive special presents in exchange.

After the birth of a child a woman is esteemed unclean, and no one will eat from her hand for seven days. North of the Hindoo Koosh this period is extended to forty days, and for the first seven the infant is not allowed to suckle its mother.

I have elsewhere discussed the old custom of disposing of the dead by burning. Now the common form of Mussulman interment is used. A small flat slab of earth about two feet long is neatly plastered over the graves, and a light is kept burning at night by newly-made graves, under the pretence of keeping away wild beasts till the earth has hardened; but, as Mr. Drew has remarked, this is more probably a relic of the old practice of cremation. No attention or care is paid to old graves, which constantly present a most unpleasant appearance, owing to the falling-in of the arched roof. I remarked in Sirikol the same want of attention to old graves